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SUBJECT: PA AND UNRWA EFFORTS AGAINST ANTI-ISRAEL INCITEMENT

REF: JERUSALEM 1739

Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubinstein
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) SUMMARY. In October 1-2 meetings, PA Minister for Religious Affairs Mahmoud al-Habash and UNRWA Gaza Director John Ging discussed PA and UNRWA efforts to eliminate incitement in PA mosques and Gaza schoolrooms. Al-Habash noted that the PA, which currently controls 80-90 percent of the West Bank's mosques, is trying to consolidate full control over the remainder by September 2010; he also noted that the Ministry of Religious Affairs enforces a prescribed set of themes for imams that exclude incitement against Israel. John Ging provided an overview of how UNRWA uses its Gaza school curriculum and community events to promote values that counter the influence of Hamas; he cites funding as the greatest limitation to UNRWA's efforts. END SUMMARY.

PA EFFORTS AGAINST WEST BANK MOSQUE INCITEMENT

2. (C) On October 1, PA Minister of Religious Affairs Mahmoud al Habash outlined his ministry's efforts to eliminate incitement from 1,500 West Bank mosques, 80-90 percent of which are currently controlled by the PA. Al Habash told Post: "we monitor and control the Friday sermons with unified talking points of approved themes, and (imams) are not allowed to stray to other topics." If an imam deviates significantly from approved themes, he said, "we bring him in, counsel him and see if we can fix the problem. If we can't, he'll be relieved from his duties and given an administrative job -- or we may separate him from service altogether." Al Habash noted the PA has partial cooperation from, but no control over, Gaza mosques.

3. (C) When asked to cite specific instances in which the PA had acted against incitement in mosques, al-Habash noted that an imam from the Tulkarm village of Qaffin was recently fired for inciting worshippers against the PA. Pressed on actions taken against imams inciting against Israel, al-Habash asserted that "There is no more incitement against Israel in (our) mosques, because compliance with our guidelines keeps such views out of the mosques (that the PA controls)." He admitted, however, that Area C mosques are a problem. "In Bethlehem's Husan (village) there are four mosques not under our control; we've been asking the IDF for two and a half months to let PASF enter Husan for this purpose and we've had no response." NOTE: Husan is an Area B/C "seam-zone" village west of the separation barrier, bordering on the Beitar Illit settlement. END NOTE.

4. (C) Al Habash noted that his ministry is currently reviewing the curriculum of eight religious schools in the West Bank and Gaza. In addition, he said, "President Abbas has approved giving (our ministry) jurisdiction over the

religious programming in the Palestinian Broadcasting Company's radio and TV programs; no publications by official Palestinian media violates the rules." Referring to recent incidents in Jerusalem (reftel), Al-Habash said, "there was no violent reaction in any Palestinian city or village; this is indicative of success in our efforts to reduce the culture of violence." NOTE: Al Habash was a member of Hamas until 1996; after that he worked with PA security services in Gaza against Hamas and joined Salam Fayyad's 2007 government as Minister of Social Affairs, changing to Religious Affairs last May. END NOTE.

UNRWA EFFORTS AGAINST INCITEMENT, AND HAMAS, IN GAZA

15. (C) On October 2, UNRWA Gaza Director John Ging reviewed UNRWA's efforts to teach human rights to roughly 208,000 Gazan children. He noted that although UNRWA is obliged to use host country curricula, all UNRWA schools in the region have integrated a stand-alone, USG-funded Human Rights and Tolerance Education curriculum. In addition, UNRWA/Gaza is in the final phase of a two-year effort to introduce a more intensive human rights program, to include discussion of the Holocaust, Gandhi's non-violent struggle for independence, and the U.S. civil rights movement. Ging noted that he had recently appeared on (pro-Hamas) Al Quds TV defending insertion of the Holocaust into the UNRWA curriculum.

16. (C) Ging said he initiated the program, which focuses on responsible behavior, critical thinking, and values, to counter Hamas rhetoric. He said that the UNRWA curriculum challenges students by asking: "what have people done in the

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past when their human rights were not respected?" With regard to the PA curriculum used throughout East Jerusalem and the West Bank, as well as in UNRWA schools, Ging noted that it had been scrubbed and revised several times. "There's room for improvement but there's nothing egregious. Although the maps in PA and Israeli textbooks differ, this is a political issue that will be resolved through the peace process."

17. (C) Ging said UNRWA seeks to counter extremist influence by introducing female teachers into boys' schools and empowering women in the community. In 2009, 250,000 children attended UNRWA's Summer Games, which included children of Hamas parents (over the objections of Hamas leaders). Ging said the limiting factor in UNRWA's efforts is money. "UNRWA is bigger than Hamas as long as it has the money," he said. "UNRWA schools educate 70 percent of all Gazan children in grades one through nine on an annual education budget of \$110 million; meanwhile, UNRWA doesn't have money for December salaries."

18. (C) Ging was blunt about the stakes of UNRWA's educational efforts. "The socialization effects of the current environment are devastating. With the formal Gaza economy in shambles, the 100,000 Palestinians who work in the tunnel economy are more susceptible to Hamas influence. If the man at the door with a Hamas charity food basket says 'cover up your daughter,' they will because they are economically dependent on Hamas." Ging argued, "the rhetoric of extremists is compelling, it is not legitimate, and it must be countered."

RUBINSTEIN